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ABSTRACT

This case study examines the process of opening and developing a new high school, with a specific emphasis on the evolution of its culture. Guided by a theoretical framework informed by the literature on school culture, this study explores the nature of school culture, how school cultures are established, the role of the principal, and the role of the external environment in the formulation of the culture of a new school. This case study finds that the nature of the school culture was technologically advanced, interdependent with its environment, and established through a collaborative process involving all participants. The role of trusted school leaders as community liaisons is critical in shaping school culture. Using a case-study approach and purposive sampling, data were collected from interviews, documents, observation, and narratives using a constant comparative method. Two key findings emerged. First, successful schools must be interdependent and engaged with the community. Second, leaders must possess the abilities required to facilitate institutional interdependence with the community. This study raises important implications for policymakers at the district and state levels. Because of the importance of community linkages in developing successful schools, policymakers must include the local level in decisions about schools and administrator training. (Contains 97 references.)(TEJ)

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The Opening of a New High School: The Emergence of a Culture

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ABSTRACT

The Opening of a New High School: The Emergence of a Culture

by

Deborah E. Stine, Ph.D.

This case study examines the process of opening and developing a new high school, with a specific emphasis on the evolution of its culture. This exploratory study was guided by a theoretical framework that is informed by the literature on school culture, integrating Smircich's (1983) conceptualization as a root metaphor for organization with Dimmock and Walker's (1998) framework delineating the four specific categories of organizational structure, curriculum, leadership and management processes, and teaching and learning as bounded and interdependent with the environment.

The research questions reflected the study's purpose: to determine how a new school is opened and its culture established. The study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What is the nature of school culture? What are the indicants that reflect the culture of a new school?
2. How is the culture of a school established?
3. What is the role of the principal in shaping the school's culture? How do a variety of factors, including the "former context" of the principal affect that role?

4. What is the role of the external environment of the school in its development and the formulation of the culture of a new school?

This case study found that the nature of the school culture was technologically advanced, interdependent with its environment and established through a collaborative process with all participants. The trusted leadership of the school played a significant role as mentor, guide, and liaison to the community in the shaping of the culture.

Using a case study approach and purposive sampling, data were collected from interviews, document reviews and observation. Narrative data were analyzed using a constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Triangulation and member checks were conducted.

This study produced two findings of note: First, that the school, to be successful, must be interdependent with its community, and secondly that leaders need to have the skills to approach this possibility. We will never have good schools if we have detached participants; they are interdependent. This study raises implications for policy makers at the district and state levels, asking that their advisers begin to include the local level in their decisions for schools, and in their standards for the training of administrators, considering the importance of the community in the development of successful schools.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

It began with a Dream.
And the Dream became a Plan.
And the Plan became a two-way mirror,
A Reflection of the Past, the Heritage,
And a Mirror of the Future Dreams of the Community
For Its Children.

Purpose of the Study

This study, with the unit of analysis as a new high school, examined the process of opening and developing a new school, with a specific emphasis on the evolution of its culture. Schein (1985a) states, "We simply cannot understand organizational phenomena without considering culture both as a cause and as a way of explaining such phenomena" (p. 311).

This inquiry began with four fundamental research questions:

1. What is the nature of school culture? What are the indicants that reflect the culture of the school?
2. How is the culture of a school established?
3. What is the role of a principal in shaping the school's culture? How do a variety of factors, including the "former context" of the principal affect that role?
4. What is the role of the external environment in the development and the formulation of the culture of a new school?

Using these questions as a guide, the investigator defined the concept of culture, for before "school culture" is defined and described, it is necessary to define culture. Culture is defined as "shared philosophies, ideologies, values, beliefs, assumptions and norms of behavior that are seldom written down or discussed, but which are learned by living and working in the organization"(Project LEAD, 1988).

and as " . . . a system of ordinary, taken-for-granted meanings and symbols with both explicit and implicit content that is, deliberately and nondeliberately, learned and shared among members of a naturally bounded social group" (Erickson, 1987.p. 12). Smircich (1983) examines culture as something that an organization is, rather than has; this perspective was adapted for the purpose of this research.

Next, in addressing the question, "what is the nature of school culture?" organizational culture is defined, as it relates specifically to the nature of the school as an organization. The definition utilized stated, "Basic assumptions and beliefs that are shared by members of an organization . . . that define in a taken for granted fashion an organization's view of itself and its environment" (Schein, 1985a, p. 311).

Having established an understanding for the terminology of culture, the other descriptor needed to be defined. The term *school* conjures up immediately certain images and expectations for all: what this study does is demonstrate how that concept gets embodied and embedded in the community, and is inseparable from it. The school (Yeats High School) mirrored the community – the total community. Everyone worked very hard to make the dream of a two high school community happen. This study demonstrates clearly the interdependence of the internal and external environments in the development of the concept *school*. This concept and what it represents was extremely important to the community.

From its beginnings, the community that was Browning determined what Yeats High School was to become, and what the nature of the culture of the school would be. The connections represented to the community's roots were the

imperative throughout this process. Some of the indicants of the culture were the physical manifestations, the buildings, programs, instructional methodologies, and extracurricular activities. The involvement of special interest and parent groups contributed to the definition of the culture of the school. Dimmock and Walker (1998) contrasted Asian and Western approaches to education, stating, ". . . In some cultures parental involvement in their children's education is encouraged and seen as essential in promoting learning. . ." (p. 586). This emphasis of parental involvement and the concept of *school* as interdependent with the community is a Western conception. Yeats High School and the nature of its culture is an excellent representation of this. The "emerald necklace" was not only symbolic of the roots of the community and what it stood for, it was symbolic of the community that was ever "on guard" (involved) to make very sure that everyone was doing their job – their best for the future of the children.

The nature of school culture was initialized in a top-down district that realized the importance of the community, that its schools were the community's schools. This realization was reflected in the beginnings, when the members passed the bond issue to build the school, not the bureaucracy; the community's name and reputation was at stake in this endeavor, and everyone involved seemed to realize this. Community and board members, district personnel and site administration met on the soccer fields, gave coffees, talked after church, at markets, theater gatherings and the local country club advocating the imperative for a school. The bond issue, this building, this plan, and this dream could not

have been completed without the tireless efforts of the community members who made this dream a reality.

Both the name and the structure of the school were important as it reflected the values of the community and desires for its children. The students at Browning High School were called upon to name it; the suggested names went to the district and community committee, and the symbolism of what that name stood for, what it represented, was discussed at length before arriving at the final name. Like the choice of the name of the school, which reflected the involvement of the external and internal environments, the building itself needed to reflect the concept of *school*, the heritage and the possibilities for the future, one of the basic values that this school represented. The library embodied that concept of school. Its components, bricks for the past, the heritage of the community, and its steel and concrete structures and futuristic "wings" that rose above the entire edifice of the school, could be seen from across the parking lot. A library and the things that it comes to stand for, education and academia, reflected the purpose of the school –in an architecturally forward-looking structure. This building was the community's vision and perception of itself, one with historical roots that met the requirements of a technological world in a secure environment. The issue of security, another important value stressed by the community was also met in the manifestation of the buildings as the gates of the closed campus securely enclosed these structures, surrounding them with twenty-four hour cameras.

The nature of the school culture reflected the community – its past and its future. This was also demonstrated in the willingness of the school to move to a

block-scheduling mode, which allowed for multiple teaching methodologies that incorporated product-product oriented lessons and sociolinguistic style, and valued the use of groups and multiple methodologies for delivery. The preoccupation with sports and extracurricular activities was also a reflection of the culture and what the community expectations for a high school included.

The mission and beliefs statements of Yeats High School were hung in every room and every hall of the school. Many of the statements of the school were found within the structure, leadership, and decision processes. The mission statement was a composite statement of the values and beliefs of the school, reflecting many hours of work. The mission of Yeats High School was as follows:

> The mission of Yeats High School is to create a nurturing and academically challenging environment, to educate our culturally diverse student population, and to prepare them to make positive life choices in a global society.

Specific belief statements found embodied in the school included:

- We believe successful education requires the collective effort of the student, parent, staff and community.
- We believe that a quality education includes excellence in teaching, exposure to technology, essential materials, and a variety of learning experiences.
- We believe that learning is a life long process.
- We believe high expectations foster greater achievement.
- We believe in a safe, nurturing environment that values each individual and promotes self-worth.
- We believe in providing the maximum opportunity for student involvement in the total school program.

Distinctive characteristics of the new school culture that were manifestations of its value system included:

1. A school that recognizes the importance of the community; that its purpose is to serve its children.
2. A school that is geared towards positive public perceptions.
3. A school where expectations are high and accountability systems are in place for students, teachers, staff, and administrators.
4. A safe and highly positive, supportive environment for students and teachers.
5. An emphasis on team membership and vitality with a focus on the future.
6. A school that is forward looking, but grounded in the past.
7. A school driven to outcomes of excellence in all endeavors, whose goals are to produce well-rounded individuals.
8. A school that is driven by the model of its principal.

One way the belief structure was carried out was through symbolic gesture. A significant example of this was the Dedication ceremony of the school. The community's ownership in the school was the desired outcome; the school's opening was celebrated and recognized through rites and rituals. This Dedication, and the dedication of the theater, with the participation of students demonstrating outcomes of the school programs, was a significant event in the school and community's life. Riley (1983) found that symbols are often evidenced by the use of stories, myths, metaphors, rewards, ritual events, and incentive systems. These symbols served to reinforce the specific belief structures of the culture. Ceremonial events initiated by leadership additionally facilitated and fostered the interdependence of the community and the school.

The teachers who joined Yeats High School in its beginnings stood behind the goals of the school, but they were generally young, energetic and wished to create a school different from Browning High School. This is in contrast to the traditional, older makeup of the staff at Browning. The characteristics of the culture of Yeats differentiating it from Browning were established and reinforced

daily through collaborative processes with the community, faculty, and staff were led by the leader and the leadership team. The new principal of Browning High School commented on the resultant differences between the two schools, noting that one of the major differences was the emphasis on technology at Yeats, stating:

> The district's attempt was to create a certain amount of conformity between the two schools. They believed that it was to their advantage to be as similar as possible. . . But it didn't happen for various reasons, among them, that those who wanted to do something different saw this as an opportunity to build new traditions and new things and tended to be younger.

The conclusions reached in this study, drawn from the findings, identify the interdependence of the external and internal environments of the school. This study empirically shows why it is so important to understand the interaction and interdependence between the community and the school.

Proposition One: The nature of the school culture is that it is a mirror to the community; that mirror reflects the interdependent nature of the school and the community.

Schein (1985a) speaks to the second question, "How is the culture of a school established?" when he notes, " . . .culture develops in response to various external and internal problems that groups face and gradually becomes abstracted into general basic assumptions" (p. 311).

As the planning of the school began, the first consideration to be contemplated was just how to convince a one hundred year old one high school community that it was imperative that they expand to a second high school. The organization itself (the district) tried through bond issues, and failed. It was not until members of the community itself reached out that this was able to succeed.

The external culture of the longstanding community dictated that certain expectations had to be adhered to and that they would be totally informed and involved throughout the entire process. It was through this response to the various external and internal problems, from the bond issue, to the struggle over school sites, to the decisions regarding replication of programs and parity, that Yeats came to be defined, first as a replication, and then as something else that reached beyond the walls of the ivy, beyond the tradition, into the direction of the future needs of the children of the community with innovation. It was at this point that Yeats began to develop an identity, from an interlocking web of networks that struggled to produce its success. The culture of the school was established through the complex interaction of the external environment and the groups within the school, forming a network with specific goals. This communication and conflict was evidenced in the multiple meetings and discussions of community members, special interest groups, and open sessions with varied departments. Some of the conflict evident in the beginnings of the culture of the school came from the instructional staff that came from areas other than Browning High School. Specific subgroups (such as Special Education, vocational education, and second language classrooms) also conferred with other departments and with administration on issues specific to their specialty. These "special interest" populations often expressed dissension at the beginning. However, these interactions, both internal and external, contributed to the establishment of the school culture. Subcultures present on the campus and special interest groups both on and off the campus helped refine what Yeats was

to become as a high school. Although parity and equity was emphasized at the beginning, the culture of the school emanated from the desire of the involved individuals of the school to create a *new* culture, not a duplicate of Browning High School.

Schein (1985a) and Deal and Peterson (1990) describe the establishment of school cultures as complex webs of traditions and rituals that have been built up over time as teachers, students and administrators work together and deal with crises and accomplishments. This web, created through the network that takes ownership for the school, results in cultural patterns that are highly enduring and have a powerful impact on performance, shaping the ways people think act and feel (Deal & Peterson, 1999).

All organizations are dependent on their environment, but some are more dependent than others. At the most basic level, institutions are viewed as:

> Cultural rules giving meaning and value to particular entities and activities . . . (T)he existence and characteristics or actors [are] socially constructed. . .[so that] organizational structures are not only influenced but internally constituted by the wider environment (Meyer, Boli & Thomas, 1987, p. 125).

In this case study, a metaphor was described, the school *was* its community. The deep roots of one hundred years as a single high school community helped shape what the foundations of the new high school would be, reflecting the needs, desires and goals for success of its children. The environmental influence was found to be pervasive and the boundaries between what was external and internal blurred, as the school became a mirror image of the community.

Proposition Two: A new school develops its own culture; all of the actions that manifest the formation of that culture are magnified in its beginnings.

Proposition Three: It is extremely important for leadership to understand the nature of the interaction of subgroups within a culture (both internal and external), and to recognize their existence and impact. Actions and Reactions become interdependent and are reflected in the educational outcomes of the children.

The next fundamental research questions addressed were, "What is the role of a principal in shaping the school's culture?" and "How do a variety of factors, including the "former context" of the principal affect that role?

Through the entire planning and building of the physical structures of the school, the leader guided the effort as a conductor. He carefully orchestrated each phase of the planning, developing and opening the new high school, in the same manner in which a conductor develops, coordinates and finally conducts an orchestra. His efforts were of leadership; his style was one of teamwork and collaboration. His 1st vice-principal, his coadministrator, was likened to his first violinist who the entire orchestra must tune to – his efforts and actions were necessary to the everyday management of the school. Reitzug and Reeves (1990) state that symbolic leadership allows the principal to simultaneously define, strengthen and articulate the cultural strands that give the school its identity. This was one of the major roles enacted by the principal at this high school.

There was a vitality, an energy that was provided by this leader, the conductor (often the cheerleader), who served many roles, among them mentor, guide and model of the leadership team. The leader was involved in each phase of this school's development, and guided the culture, through initial understandings of the goals of the school (through the hiring process), through

accountability measures to insure success, having an open door to the faculty, students and the community at all times, and through symbolic behaviors, both verbal and nonverbal. The principal valued his school; he was on the campus picking up trash, leading the pep rallies, but remembering to compliment the students on their test scores, meeting with CIF, and meeting with students, teachers, parent groups and public service organizations. His actions communicated the values of the school, a school that addresses the needs of all of the students, that individuals may look to with pride. This principal was also a public relations leader, emphasizing the importance of serving the community and valuing its perceptions. Each of the facets of the school culture showed direct links to, and the marked influence of, the principal's symbolic behaviors. These behaviors specifically influenced the interaction of organizational participants with, and helped define the manifestations of the structures the school (physical, internal and external) in the developing school culture.

Proposition Four: The symbolic behaviors of the principal were instrumental in establishing and reinforcing the culture of the school.

The examination of the area of leader effects led to the delineation of significant roles that were played by this principal in the formation of a new school. These roles included:

- Leader, liaison to the district and the community.
- Collaborative team leader and member, bringing commitment and loyalty to the school as a model.
- Mentor, Guide and Transition Administrator Between the "Old World" and the "New".
- Nurturer and Maintainer of the Quality of the Culture Through Symbolic Gesture.
- Promoter of ownership and responsibility through role design and accountability systems.

Schein (1986) has noted that leaders transmit and embed culture in part, by what they pay attention to. They also emit powerful cues by what they choose not to pay attention to. Such "selective attention" (Reitzug & Reeves, 1990) can be a powerful leadership tool in the creation and maintenance of culture.

Proposition Five: The leadership and symbolic behaviors of the principal act as a bridging mechanism between the internal and external environments of the school, playing a major role in the development of the culture of the school.

Of additional importance is the "former context" of the principal, as his previous experience and established legacy at Browning High School were some of the important reasons that he was initially chosen for the position of new high school principal at Yeats. The ten years that he spent as principal of Browning established this leader as a figure to be trusted in the community. During this tenure he addressed the needs of the community, and consulted and participated daily with business and community members. His "former context" and connections also aided easing the transition process as he left Browning, as he consulted and collaborated with the new succeeding principal, and began to plan the new high school. The principal demonstrated his knowledge of the past and acceptance of the future in a collaborative process.

The cooperation between the principals of the two high schools was extensive and essential if the community was to be satisfied. In addressing this issue, leaders need to examine the priorities necessary to achieve unity in a school district. Leaders, faculty and staff members of both high schools and the community worked together to achieve the goal of two high schools that were not identical, but still reflected the fundamental values (of education) of the

community. The previous context of both the new principals of Yeats and Browning made this possible, as they were both "knowns" in the community. The establishment of a base of trust with the community was significant, and could only be accomplished in this community by an insider. The previous experience of Yeats' new principal, his daily involvement in the community through clubs and business connections, and his continual communication of the collaborative concept of a team were factors in influencing the major roles that this leader played in guiding the culture of Yeats High School.

Proposition Six: Incoming and outgoing principals need to engage in collaborative processes with each other and the community if the transition is to be a success.

When a culture is changed, people experience a sense of loss; every transition needs some kind of way to "mark" (or honor) the occasion and invite participation and ownership. The transition process, the "changing of the guard" (principals), has been contrasted with that of a new military command (Deal, 1999). When a new military officer takes over, ceremony and ritual are observed. The occasion for both the new and the departing officer is enhanced with honor. In contrast to the military approach, often principals "appear" in a new school year, and the previous principals disappear. Ritual and ceremony were observed in the beginnings of the new school. It is that honor, ritual and ceremony that needs to be considered and enacted by the leadership teams; the faculty needs to see the principles of cooperation and collaboration as a model. Ritual and ceremony become extremely important to the establishment of a culture.

Proposition Seven: Leadership in transition needs to participate in ceremonies that honor and involve both arriving and departing leaders.

The principal's previous experience and context allowed him to have the ability to have a more global view of the situation. Deal (1999) provides advice to be heeded in this circumstance as a guideline for leaders, "when you're in a situation that you don't really understand, you need to go to the balcony". This same necessity is stressed in the Indian culture, stressing that it is necessary to use the "eye of the eagle" (Tafoya, 1999). What is important here is that the leader steps back sufficiently to be able to see the entire situation, not just the close-up view. The leadership of Yeats High School had an advantage to utilize "the eye of the eagle" because of previous knowledge of the culture of the external community and therefore the ability to "see" the whole picture.

The accountability factors put into place at the district and site level were also a result of the community's influence. The district "used a magnifying glass", often examining daily occurrences at the site level. Yet, because of the tenure of the insider administrators, there was a level of trust. The district and the schools were accountable to the community, and this connection was perpetuated through the embedding of the schools within the community structure.

This study, and the actions of the leader translate to an imperative in understanding for aspiring and practicing leaders:

Proposition Eight: The leadership of a new high school needs to establish a trust base within the community, recognizing that what occurs internally is highly dependent on the community expectations.

Proposition Nine: The leader of a school needs to function as a collaborative guide and a liaison to promote ownership in the school itself.

The final question that was posed at the beginning of this research, "What is the role of the external environment in the development and the formulation of a new school?" has been answered through every area that has been described in this case study. The leadership must communicate continually with its constituency in the development and formulation of its school. This connection of past and future, of community and school was reflected in the values and beliefs communicated by Yeats High School.

Proposition Ten: The environment and the school are inseparable, because the school's purpose is to fulfill the needs of the community; they are interdependent and must be if the school is to be a success.

The Need for Additional Research

Although some researchers (Blau, 1963) criticize case studies, stating that they are not generalizable to other settings, others (Yin, 1984) recognize that the purpose of this type of study is to expand theory rather than to generalize across populations. It may be argued that the findings from this study, obtained as they were from a single site, may not generalize to other schools or districts. The process, however, of opening a high school and developing its culture, could be enlightening to administrators in a similar circumstance, providing suggestions and guidance from the lessons learned at this specific school site.

Extending the duration of the study over a more substantial time period would also prove to be valuable. Because the influences that dominate the development of a culture are much more evident in a new situation, these roles become highlighted. Because the opportunity for leader influence is most pronounced during the beginnings of an organization (Martin, Sitkin, & Boehm,

1985, Schein, 1984), this study was limited to the beginning of the new school's operation. As the culture of the new school matures, however, leader influence on the interaction of organizational participants may vary. Future studies over extended time periods would contribute to an understanding of the cultural development processes.

Significance of This Study

This study is significant in that the literature base is extremely sparse in the area that it addresses: the opening of a high school and the evolution of its culture. It is also significant in the examination of the interplay between the external environment (both district and community), the leader and his collaborators and the entire faculty and staff of Yeats high school. Useful information is also provided through this research concerning the impact that the culture and historical roots of the community can have upon the development of the culture of a school.

In addition to this, this study raises implications for policy makers at the district and state levels. Despite this study's exploratory intent and in depth inquiry into one specific case, the issues it raises must be treated with seriousness as it relates to the initiation of state and district policies. This study produced two findings of note: The first expresses the value that a school is its community. To be successful, the school must be interdependent with its community. Secondly, leaders need to have the skills to approach this possibility. We will never have good schools if we have detached participants; they are interdependent. Certainly it can be argued that it is important for additional research to confirm the findings

of this study. However, it is imperative for the importance of the community to be addressed at the policy level through legislation.

It is in that spirit that the findings of this study are discussed, with implications for policy makers. First, the "voice" of the community through the parents and teachers needs to be heard at the policy-making level. The hierarchy of policy comes from the State Legislature in the form of the Education Code, through the State Board of Education through Title V, and through the quasi-independent California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CCTC), and finally through the national regional accrediting body, the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) and the accrediting commission for schools (K-12 accreditation, a subset of WASC). The CCTC currently has one business representative on its commission, and no parents or teachers. WASC has a solo representative of the Parent Teacher Association (PTA), and no others. In order to address the necessary interdependence of the schools and the community, this leadership needs to be expanded to include the voices of representatives of the community. In addition to this, because the state level policy makers cannot possibly address all of the diverse needs of the communities within their state, state organizations need to give, or delegate more power. These organizations need to be an umbrella, rather than a watchdog, maintaining specific standards, but facilitating the development of discretionary guidelines to assist addressing issues at the local level.

In addition, the CCTC provides the state standards for accreditation of its state's leaders. Within this structure, there needs to be consideration at the policy

level for an enhanced induction program that includes mentoring for its administrators. This program needs to insure, as it currently does, that its aspiring and practicing administrators achieve certain competencies. However, these competencies need to be expanded to include work-experience application, internships, job shadowing, collaborative groups, team building exercises, learning from actual case studies of successful (and unsuccessful) administrators, and crisis management. This enhanced program needs to include a participation component that includes active participation and interaction with community and business groups, emphasizing the importance of their role in the school's success. Policy makers and their advisers must begin to include the local level in their decisions for schools, and in their standards for the training of administrators. If the goal is good schools, and improved performance, the interdependence of the school and its community must be recognized – the connections are essential. We will never have good schools if we have detached participants.

This land and the culture of this school were based on strong cultural tenets. This research has been significant to contribute to the knowledge base and to provide leaders with an example of what could be. Although this community was unique, the building of a culture of a school contains many similar characteristics across territorial areas. Leadership is significant in formulating the culture: the leader can be the guide, the mentor, and the nurturer. Leaders in the coming millennium are challenged to build and lead schools that mirror the desires of the community, where education represents excellence in the growth of every child and in the difference that every teacher can make. These possibilities

exist in a culture that reflects its values that the past is time-honored, where learning and caring are valued, and where ceremonies, rituals and stories provide definition to the identity of the school. Here leaders can make a difference, but not alone; they need to collaborate with policy makers to make this happen. The interdependent nature of the school and the community encourages the possibilities of producing a network or web of leaders found in both the internal and external environments of the school, whose efforts can reflect that the school is more than a building, but a culture with a history, a purpose, values and pride.

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